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Best in show:

how to win photo competitions

With the multitude of both local and international contests offering large cash prizes and the chance to be seen by thousands, entering competitions is now big business. In the second part of our series on competitions, Armani Nimerawi speaks to industry experts to uncover the secrets of competition success.



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The Trusted Original



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Entering photographic contests can be an incredibly rewarding experience, whether you win or not, with benefits that extend far beyond the obvious accumulation of prize money. So get your pens and calendars at the ready; there are incredible prizes and rewards out there just waiting for you to reach out and grab them.

What's in it for me?

You don't have to be a mercenary to be drawn in by the allure of the cash prizes on offer in many competitions. While amounts will differ from competition to competition, some offer up to \$100,000 for first prize. Some competitions will be acquisitive, so ensure the prize on offer is worth what you're giving up. "The best competitions offer in excess of \$10,000 if you win and they then acquire that work," says David Knight, an advertising photographer who specialises in portraiture and was recently a short-listed finalist for the British National Portrait Gallery's Taylor Wessing Photographic Prize in Portraiture.

Other competitions offer product-based prizes as well as opportunities for certain finalists to give their career an extra boost. The Taylor Wessing Prize, for example, has for the past three years offered the *ELLIE* commission, where one photographer is selected from the exhibition by the magazine to shoot a story. "This is great vocational experience for the

chosen photographer and can add to their commercial portfolio," says Terence Pepper, curator of photographs at the Taylor Wessing Prize.

Incredible boost to your bank balance aside, entering competitions also has a number of less immediately tangible rewards. For many photographers, the crucial exposure gained by being short-listed or winning a competition will often translate into valuable work. "Past winners and exhibitors have gone on to be represented by galleries and used by magazines as a result of the exposure from the exhibition," says Pepper.

Other benefits are even more subtle still. If it's not work you're in need of, but rather the motivation to get started in the first place, entering competitions can be beneficial here too. For Moshe Rosenzweig, director of the Head On Foundation, the pressure of competition deadlines can give you that much needed motivation boost to get moving while providing a theme to focus your ideas.

It's not me, it's you.

For many, the competition outcome is insignificant and it is the chance to receive feedback and grow as an artist that offers an invaluable opportunity. "Competitions give many a chance to be able to gauge their progress as a photographer," says Nathan Oxley, competition director of the International Loupe Awards. "They might get a bronze award one

ABOVE LEFT: First place in the People & Portrait category at the 2011 International Loupe Awards.

ABOVE RIGHT: Overall winner of the International Photography Awards (IPA) 2011. The series *Landmine Victims* also won first place in the Professional, People category.



Competitions give many a chance to be able to gauge their progress as a photographer.

Nathan Oxley

year and they'll aim to get a couple of silver awards the next."

This is a competition reward with a sting and accepting criticism and rejection are often part of the competition experience. "You do need to be very open-minded when entering competitions," says commercial photographer Damien Bredberg, who recently was awarded first prize in the People and Portraits category of the International Loupe Awards. "You need to be willing to accept all sorts of feedback; the good and the bad. I've always focused on the bad as opposed to the good. I don't necessarily want to hear good feedback. If someone says, 'Wow that's perfect. That's a great image,' you can't improve from that. It's the negative feedback that you can take on-board and use to your advantage."

Knight is quick to point out however, that whether your work is awarded or not, competitions are by no means the be all and the end all. "Awards are just one way of showcasing your work and getting some publicity," he says. "The worth of your work is not determined by whether or not it wins a competition. Don't be deterred if you don't win. Who knows, it might be valid in 20 years to come. If every artist that wasn't successful in their day gave up, you would not have your van Goghs and your Monets."

Know your motivations

While you may be well versed in the reasons you should enter competitions, knowing which ones to enter can be more confusing. A good place to start is considering what you want out of the competition experience. For most photographers the main incentive is the chance of exposure. "To me it's just about keeping your work in the spotlight and having people see it," says Knight.

If your main motivator is exposure, look for competitions that will be judged by people in the industry you'd like to see yourself in. "There was a lag period for me for the last few years where I was very much APPA focused, very much Australian focused and I was entering competitions that were judged by other photographers," says Bredberg. "I am now starting to

enter competitions that are more advertising-based, where agencies, copywriters and creative directors judge them, not photographers. For me that's really beneficial in terms of picking up new and exciting campaigns."

While the charm of prize-money proves overwhelmingly tempting for some entrants, especially those starting out, Bredberg is adamant that such rewards are often fleeting and entrants should look to the longevity of the benefits of a competition win. "There are great competitions out there that have extraordinary amounts of prize money but the quality of the images that are entered are not great and you don't benefit apart from a financial gain," he says. "That only goes so far. You could spend twenty grand in a week if you want, but there are other competitions that might only have \$1,000 prize money, but where those images are seen and who sees them could bring \$100,000 worth of work."

Forking out

While some competitions are free, most will require you to part with an entry fee. Before you narrow your eyes in suspicion and cynically cry "scam", consider the substantial costs of running the competitions that you mark on your calendar each year. Pepper explains that there are a wide range of costs such as administration, receiving, handling and inventorying the prints, protecting and storing the photographs while they are in the organiser's care, and also extensive costs involved with the staging of exhibitions and its publicity.

Rosenzweig agrees: "Last year we had about 150 events, seminars, workshops, artist talks, tonnes of other things. That's where the money goes. It is important that people know when they put money into something like this it's actually going towards promoting photography and photographers."

Do not assume however that the motives of all competitions are as pure as your own. In order to avoid competitions that are purely money making schemes, Knight suggests giving competitions that allow unlimited paid submissions a wide berth.

ABOVE LEFT: First place in the Editorial: War/Conflict Pro category at the 2011 IPA - Agent Orange.

ABOVE RIGHT: Fifth place, Photojournalism category at the International Loupe Awards in 2011.

Before submitting work, weigh up the cost of entering against the potential benefits. Don't just take into account the entry fee as there are many hidden costs of entering, from the time you will spend selecting and preparing images for submission to production costs. While some competitions will work with sponsors who absorb the cost of producing prints (such as Head On's collaboration with sponsor Pixel Perfect) most will not, so always ensure you have anticipated all costs associated before entering.

Just as the terms and conditions should always be scrutinised, the judging procedure is always worth examining. For Oxley, a judging process that ensures diversity in the winners is imperative. "Our judges don't judge any images from their own country," he says. "Certain styles evolve in different regions and by doing this it takes the local bias out of the equation and it grows a more international and unbiased competition."

The diversity and credentials of the panel are also important factors to consider. "We research for a well-rounded panel each year," says Pepper, "trying to get a diverse age and gender range. We try to include a practitioner, a reviewer/critic or a gallerist or someone otherwise involved in the industry. As well as trying to prevent bias, this also refreshes the exhibition each year as different judges have different tastes."

Backing a winner

When choosing which images will set you apart from the rest, best practice is to look further than demonstrating your technical prowess. While it doesn't pay (literally) to enter technically poor images, most judges are looking for something more than evidence you're proficient with Photoshop. "The one instruction the judges get each year is very broad and it's simply choose images that you can connect with," says Rosenzweig. "That's why I suppose the show is so popular. People connect with it. We may not all connect with the same images, but because there are three people choosing there is enough variety for many people in many different ways."

For Bredberg this was a hard-learned lesson. After years of focusing on entering images that were technically challenging, but lacking emotion, he now believes it is the ability to tell a story that sets the award-winners apart. "When an image spins around towards a judge they want to be drawn in, to feel like they're there, like they know what the photographer is trying to express, to feel the story," he says. "They don't want to be left wondering what the image is about. As soon as you create confusion with an image you've lost the audience and then what happens is your success lies purely on the technical, and that's not enough to get an image up with the winners."

Some competitions will also exhibit certain trends so it can't hurt to do a little bit of research before entering. Oxley suggests getting to know a competition by attending (if it's a physical print competition), in order to become familiar with the style of images that are being entered. For online competitions he suggests viewing online galleries from previous years and seeing what has stood out in the past. He doesn't believe however, that entrants should feel limited by trends. "Sometimes it's good to put something different in and to test the waters," he says. "It's good to try and challenge, but do it with education and awareness behind you."

Jade Tran, competition director of the International Photography Awards (IPAs) agrees, stating that at the IPAs, individuality is rewarded. "The jurors' backgrounds vary, but inevitably photographers that stand out present uniquely creative, well-composed images that reflect a solid, personal style and a specific visual voice," she says.

Finally, to help you choose what images to submit, Bredberg and Oxley suggest initiating the help of a mentor or a photographer you admire to offer invaluable feedback on the images you plan to submit.

All for one, one for all

Ultimately, whatever your reasons for entering, supporting photographic competitions of integrity doesn't just benefit you, but the industry as a whole. "We hope that in bringing photographers' work to



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the attention of notables in the photo world, and by presenting the unique combination of \$20,000 in cash prizes, a Lucie statue, and multiple possibilities of exhibiting work, we can engender opportunity for both professional and emerging photographers and promote the appreciation of photography the world over," says Tran.

The dates and entry fees for the competitions listed below are based on the previous year's entry data and are subject to change. *Capture* does not specifically endorse the competitions listed and it's the responsibility of photographers to thoroughly review all terms and conditions. ■

CONTACTS AND RESOURCES

Damien Bredberg	www.damienbredberg.com.au
David Knight	www.knight-photo.com
Head On Photo Festival	www.headon.com.au
International Loupe Awards	www.loupeawards.com
International Photography Awards	www.photoawards.com
Taylor Wessing Prize	www.npg.org.uk

ABOVE: First place in the Photojournalism category at the International Loupe Awards in 2011.

	Entry fee	Approx. closing dates	Frequency	Contact details	Prizes
International					
Deutsche Börse Prize	TBA	TBA 2012	Annual	deutsche-boerse.com/dbag/dspatch/en/kir/gdb_navigation/about_us/30_Art_Collection/25_photography_prize	€30,000 for first place
Epson International Photographic Pano Awards	US\$20 per entry, unlimited entries	20 April 2012	Annual	www.thepanoawards.com	US\$25,000 in total, cash & prizes
International Loupe Awards	US\$35 per entry, unlimited entries	October 2012	Annual	www.loupeawards.com	US\$20,000 in total plus prizes
International Photography Awards	US\$23 for a single entry, US\$40 for a series	31 May 2012	Annual	www.photoawards.com/en/	\$10,000 for first place
Leica Oskar Barnack Award	Free, maximum of 12 entries	1 March 2012	Annual	www.leica-oskar-barnack-award.com	€15,000 for first place & Leica products
National Geographic	US\$15 per entry, unlimited entries	November 2012	Annual	ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/photo-contest/	US\$10,000 for first place & a trip to NG headquarters
Nikon Small World Competition	Free, maximum of 3 entries	30 April 2012	Annual	www.nikonsmallworld.com	US\$3,000 first prize towards Nikon equipment
Pictures of the Year International	US\$50 for up to 15 entries	January 2013	Annual	www.poyi.org	US\$10,000 in total in cash & prizes
Pulitzer Prize	US\$50, maximum of 3 entries per entry	TBA 2013	Annual	www.pulitzer.org	US\$10,000 for first place in each category
Sony World Photography Award	Free, maximum of 10 entries per category	TBA 2013	Annual	www.worldphoto.org/competitions/sony-world-photography-awards-2012-professional-competition/	US\$25,000 for first place, plus L'Iris d'Or
The Best of Photojournalism	Free, maximum of 20 entries	3 February 2012	Annual	bop.nppa.org/2012/	Featured on website & published in News Photographer magazine
Travel Photographer of the Year	£10-20 per entry, unlimited entries	October 2012	Annual	www.tpoty.com	£50,000 in total, cash & prizes
World Press Photo	Free	January 2013	Annual	www.worldpressphoto.org/2012-photo-contest	€10,000 for first place, plus title
National					
ACMP Trampoline Projections	\$30 (members) \$50 (non members), maximum of 12 entries (but entries must be part of a series)	14 April 2012	Annual	www.theprojections.com	\$5,000 worth of Sony camera products
Basil Sellers Art Prize	\$33, maximum of 5 entries	24 June 2013	Annual	www.sellersartprize.com.au	\$100,000 acquisitive major prize & people's choice \$5,000
Canon AIPP Photography Awards	Varies, depending on category	25 May 2012 (27 May for prints)	Annual	www.aipp.com.au	\$20,000 in Canon products
CCP Documentary Photography Award	\$TBA, unlimited entries	TBA 2012	Biannual	www.ccp.org.au/documentary_award.php	TBA
CCP Kodak Salon	\$33 (members) \$60 (non members), maximum of 4 entries	TBA 2012	Annual	www.ccp.org.au/exhibitions.php?f=20110604_Gallery_2	\$16,000 in total
Head On Portrait Prize	\$30 per image (\$25 for members)	11 March 2012	Annual	headon.com.au/content/head-portrait-prize	\$50,000 in total
Heritage Acquisitive Photographic Awards	\$25 per entry, maximum of 4 entries	27 May 2012	Annual	www.heritage.com.au/Sponsorship-Events/Photographic-Awards.aspx	\$8,000 in total
Josephine Ulrich/Win Schubert Photographic Award	\$30 (members) \$50 (non members), maximum 1 entry (consisting of 3 artworks)	February 2013	Annual	www.theartscentrec.com.au/whats-on/whats-on-items/2012-josephine-ulrick-photography-award	\$30,000 in total
Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize	\$25 per entry, unlimited entries	21 March 2012	Annual	www.moranprizes.com.au	\$80,000 acquisitive major prize
National Photographic Portrait Prize	\$25 per entry, maximum of 3 entries	October 2012	Annual	www.portrait.gov.au/site/nppp-finalists.php	\$25,000 for first prize
Nikon-Walkley Photographic Award	Free or \$260 for non-MEAA members	1 September 2012	Annual	www.walkleys.com	Award title
Olive Cotton Award for Excellence in Photographic Portraiture	\$30, maximum 1 entry	TBA 2012	Biannual	www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/ArtGallery/ArtGalleryOliveCotton.aspx	\$20,000 acquisitive major prize
Stanthorpe Art Prize	\$30, maximum of 3 entries	TBA 2013	Biannual	www.srag.org.au	\$10,000 for first place
Sunshine Coast Art Prize 2D	\$25, maximum of 3 entries	31 March 2012	Annual	2d.scap.org.au	\$15,000 (acquisitive) plus four week residency worth \$5,000
Sydney Morning Herald Shoot the Chef	Free	August 2012	Annual	cravesydney.com/cmspage.php?intid=647&linkid=649	Two economy return flights to an overseas destination
William and Winifred Bowness Photography Prize	\$50, maximum of 5 entries	June 2012	Annual	www.mga.org.au/bowness-prize	\$25,000 for first, \$1,000 people's choice